

## Gracepoint

by Amy Suzanne Parker

The dense gusts outside of my apartment conjure black clouds that amass overhead. It's 3 a.m., August 28, 2015, and I can't help but ingest the blackness around me. Like drinking ink, venom. There is a tropical storm, Erika, in the Atlantic Ocean, gaining strength. Together, she and I whirl in the darkness.

I awake from a vivid nightmare of past sexual abuse. Flashes of my grandpa's hands on my seven-year-old body and a blue condom keep appearing in my mind, while the tropical storm surges in my head. Erika sweeps her skirt in a spiral in my skull. Soon I find myself in the bathroom, the cap of the Klonopin bottle off, the bottle tilted toward my open hand, a bottle of SmartWater to wash it all down. After the pills, the vodka in the pantry. I read somewhere that the combination of benzos and alcohol is fatal.

I put the cap back on the Klonopin bottle, dress as quietly as possible, grab my purse and keys so I don't wake my sleeping boyfriend who works two jobs, and plug "Tampa General Hospital" (TGH) into my phone for directions.

I figure they have a psych ward and a doctor who does electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), a treatment that has worked for me in the past.

I drop my car off with the ER valet. The automatic doors provide a welcome whoosh of air conditioning.

"I'm suicidal." My voice cracks as I tell the nurse.

The valet drives my car away. The security guard takes my belongings. I change into hospital gowns, one in front, one around back, and hand over my glasses to the guard.

It is around 6 a.m. The winds in my head are seventy mph, still only tropical storm strength. I wait. A nurse draws blood. The tests all come back normal.

Noon comes. The second shift nurse gives me a turkey sandwich, yogurt, and applesauce with orange juice to wash it down. I eat most of it.

I wait. A nurse explains that TGH is not a Baker-Act-determining/accepting facility, so they are sending me to one instead. In Florida, patients who are a threat to themselves or others can be involuntarily hospitalized for seventy-two hours under this law.

They do not perform ECT there, the nurse says. He says that a van will transport me to the facility.

Right before I head off to the van, a young woman comes into the room. She is a social worker, young and freckled. “With sexual abuse, it’s about forgiveness,” she says. But it’s not about the abuser, my grandpa. I don’t have to forgive him; I need to forgive myself. I can’t let the past define me. It wasn’t my fault. I am so much more than what happened.

I feel a little better already, like I have some kind of power. Like my hands were controlling the bottle of Klonopin after all.

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The wind from Tropical Storm Erika sweeps up the two hospital gowns that cover me. I wear only a tank top and yoga pants underneath and hospital socks. No shoes. I could be wearing all the clothes in the world and still feel like I do now—naked. The van’s driver leads me inside.

Without my glasses, objects and people blur into one another. While I sit to be admitted, I twist the ends of my hospital gowns and jiggle my legs up and down. Maybe I look like a crazy person.

Men wheel in a stretcher. A pretty woman in glasses is yelling about Jehovah God and how she is the Queen of Sheba.

A nurse huffs, “Oh God. Not this again. She was just in here.”

The woman babbles until she goes into the waiting room where there is a TV. I come into the room later after my paperwork goes through to my insurance company. I have waited hours. I can’t see the clock, and everything’s melting, turning into a Dalí painting. The hospital did not administer my morning meds. By default, I retreat to my dissociative state, and once again, my body is a shell full of ricocheting incoherent thoughts, memories, and dreams. We’re in a room with white faux-leather chairs, beige

walls, and an array of patients muttering, twitching, moaning, the only light coming from the TV. I wonder what Dalí would've made of this.

From 3 p.m. to 1 a.m., I sit with the other waiting patients in this room and watch TruTv, a marathon of the pet version of *America's Funniest Home Videos*. The chairs are all filled. One scruffy man paces, and some other patients lay down a mattress so he can sleep on the floor. He pees all over the bathroom, the staff complain. I haven't had anything to eat or drink since the hospital. My lips are chapped. Sometimes the Queen of Sheba laughs at the videos on TV, and I see a spark of joy, more than a crazed caricature, a *person*.

The staff cuts off the ties on my hospital gowns but leave me in a room with two young, skinny women. My thoughts dart to tying the sheets around my neck and hanging myself. *Maybe the bathroom door would work as an anchor*. I've never been good at figuring out how to hang myself. In the past with belts or purse straps, I've choked, given up, my limbs collapsed. I quit thinking, and my body begs for sleep.

I float yet remain tethered to my body. I have not taken any of my meds today, but some invisible umbilical cord keeps me from drifting away, anchoring me in this storm.

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The summer before high school, in 2000, I read *Girl, Interrupted*. I identified the most with the character who set herself on fire. Singed flesh is a nice way of telling everyone you're damaged without saying a word.

I thought there was something wrong with me, so my mom took me to our primary care physician. I was diagnosed with dysthymia in that September. By October, I thought about going to sleep forever. The Celexa my primary care physician gave me wasn't working. So I popped eight 10 mg Amitriptyline tablets, when I was supposed to take one to treat a migraine. A trial run. People can take up to 300 mg a day of the drug for depression, so it wasn't serious. I thought that I'd go to sleep for a while, and when I woke up, everything would be fixed.

The next day, Monday, my mom called the guidance counselor who called the school psychologist, Dr. Mason.<sup>1</sup> "Were you trying to kill yourself?" she asked.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed.

“I don’t know.” I was fourteen.

I followed Dr. Mason’s advice and consented to be hospitalized at the psych ward at Morton Plant Hospital, where I was born. My mother ranted. “I know *exactly* how you feel,” she assured me, but according to her, thousands of dollars of hospital-staff surveillance and joke therapy wouldn’t do any good.

My mother, despite a lifetime of depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder, has never been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons. She’s never attempted suicide either.

My father was summoned to deal with the crisis at hand. He came straight from work, still in his dress shirt and Dockers. He fiddled with the ballpoint pens in his shirt pocket. His ruddy face was a map of capillaries and pores with a topography of stubble, his eyes caverns dark with worry. Minutes tick-tocked into hours of paperwork and questions. I’d left school at 1 p.m., packed, and went to the hospital. Around 7 p.m., the staff had taken every potentially harmful implement from me, even for methods I hadn’t even thought of yet—shoelaces, belts, drawstrings from sweatpants, and pens. Before my arrival, my assigned roommate held a pen to her carotid artery and threatened to stab herself. The nurses sent her to the Quiet Room.

During the night, my insomnia lured me into a daze where I emerged from my room to ask the nurses what time it was. “It’s 3:45. Go back to bed,” they barked. I was still wide awake at 7 a.m., when we had to get up. The doctor took a look at the nurses’ notes and added Trazodone to help me sleep at night.

After a stale breakfast encased in Styrofoam, we attended therapy, during which the counselor, Anthony, asked us the usual questions: “Why don’t you do well in school?” (I did.) “Do you have any friends or family members who serve as positive influences?” (Yes.) And without directly asking, what besides cutting, overdosing, planning to jump off the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, numbing yourselves with cocaine and pot (unspoken: the drugs the doctors prescribed us), bingeing, purging, pulling your pubic hair out, threatening to poison your stepmother, and writing Plath-inspired poetry could help you cope? (Silence.)

Everyone aired their laundry lists of abuse, except me. I'd buried the memories of my grandpa's abuse so deeply that its only manifestation was the tide of nausea I felt whenever I was around him, the feeling of needing to vomit up my skeleton.

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We teens had "free" time. A few of us sat in the TV room. The nurses' selection both amused and slighted us: *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. Here is a character who obviously suffers from some mental instability searching for his stolen bike. He befriends and converses with inanimate objects. "Man, I can't believe we're in here, and that guy's out there. What the fuck is wrong with society?" Derek, the boy who looked like he belonged in some 90s grunge band, was disturbed by who was inside and outside of the pathological bubble. First, it was fiction, but I also noted to myself that the actor playing Pee-wee was arrested for masturbating in an adult movie theater in Sarasota, so he was not fully on the outside after all.

"The mind plays tricks on you," Pee-wee explains on screen. "You play tricks back! It's like you're unraveling a big cable-knit sweater that someone keeps knitting and knitting...."<sup>2</sup>

We understood.

I wasn't even required to stay the full seventy-two hours stipulated by the Baker Act because I had been hospitalized voluntarily. On the second day, I amped up the saccharine in my voice and flashed the nurses and therapist a dimpled smile, swearing I'd never take too many pills again.

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After a suicide attempt, an overdose of Klonopin, in 2006, I had one major depressive episode every two years, like clockwork. For each episode, I had electroconvulsive therapy, and it resurrected me. However, for the first three episodes, I had ECT on an outpatient basis.

For my fourth major depressive episode in 2012, I had the procedure three times a week at Shands Hospital in Gainesville, over 100 miles away. The most reasonable solution was the inpatient route, so I stayed in the psych ward for two weeks. My

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<sup>2</sup> *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. Directed by Tim Burton, performance by Paul Reubens, Warner Brothers, 1985.

parents had gone to UF and thought Shands was an excellent hospital, better than the ones in Tampa.

This time, the patients were all women. Jessica, the resident cutter, gave me a tour. Diane had a pink walker and babbled on down the hall to no one. Ellen, the mysterious one, was on bedrest the entire time and was fed by the nurses. Brittany, in her twenties, alternated between a Marilyn Monroe and an Audrey Hepburn t-shirt, but always paired it with the same Snoopy pajama pants. Nicole was in her fifties with a retired-cop husband (and therefore, knew a little more about the right ways to kill oneself). Tori was a fast friend, bipolar and around my age (twenty-six), who graduated from Smith, my dream school. She, Brittany, Jessica, and I fit that young White woman depressive suicidal stereotype. Plathian ennui:

*In a strange way were free. We'd reached the end of the line. We had nothing more to lose. Our privacy, our liberty, our dignity: All of this was gone and we were stripped down to the bare bones of our selves.*<sup>3</sup>

I had my own room at Shands, and as long as I was in the nurses' sights, I could have a pen and write. Electroconvulsive therapy, recovery time, meals, art therapy, group therapy, medication times—even with all of this, we had free time. I tried to read. My parents bought me Steve Martin's *An Object of Beauty* from the hospital gift shop, but Lou Reed's words on electroshock were never truer:

*But every time you tried to read a book  
You couldn't get to page 17  
'Cause you forgot, where you were  
So you couldn't even read.  
Don't you know, they're gonna kill your sons*<sup>4</sup>

But your daughters will do their best to kill themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Susanna Kaysen. *Girl, Interrupted*. Kindle, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> "Kill Your Sons." *Sally Can't Dance*, RCA, 1974.

At Gracepoint, in 2015, I become Tammy. That's according to the "looniest" resident, a disheveled forty-something white man named Bill who's been wearing the same blue t-shirt and gray sweatpants this whole time. He has not showered since he's arrived, and from the staff's complaints, I gather he's been around for at least a week. He talks in a falsetto, except when he speaks to men and calls them "motherfuckers." Then his voice descends into a growl.

Everyone is given a different name by Bill. Laura is Kelly. The nurses are Mariah, Mary, and a dozen other names. Sometimes a person has more than one name or identity to Bill, but he always refers to me as Tammy. My husband's name is Randy. Bill proposes to Kelly/Laura at lunch one day. She says she has a boyfriend. Then he asks us to have a threesome with us. We both say no politely.

Later, in the dining room, he spits out his piece of ham onto the floor. At the end of lunch, when we line up against the wall to go back to the main area, I throw up what little I have eaten and the medicine the nurse gave me for my migraine. My vomit is pink and has corn in it. The nurse gave me red Kool-Aid to take with the Motrin. I throw up all over myself and onto the floor in front of everyone. Most are silent and look away, my roommates call me a "disgusting bitch," and Laura and the other women comfort me. Before dinner, one of them, a woman with perfect bangs who carries a blue blanket as if it holds a baby, lets me hold it as we wait in line.

Out of all the things taken from us, Laura and I are the most upset about not having our phones. There are public phones for the patients and one at the front desk for long-distance calls.

That night, Bill gets fed up with the staff and the other patients' telling him to shut up and sit down. He slaps his legs and shouts, "I'm gonna call Obama." He doesn't know how to work the public phones, and the idea soon flies out of his spinning mind.

Laura tells me why she's here. She goes to USF and lives with two other girls in the dorms. They called the police saying that she was going to kill herself by slitting her wrists. She says they mistook her—she often scratches herself across her wrists with her fingernails. I glance in the direction of her wrists. There are no marks.

A young Black man sits in the corner and sings Cohen's "Hallelujah," his voice a booming bass. Some patients are here because they were arrested for drug use and

quake with withdrawal, some for anger management whom the staff hold back from punching the walls and each other, some for being homeless and streaming sentences without syntax, some just for not obeying law enforcement and for not being White. One teenage Hispanic father begs to speak to his daughter on the phone, “I need to speak to my daughter. Let me speak to my daughter. You don’t understand.” Two staff members usher him away from the phones. “You’ve had your calls for the day,” one says.

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It’s been two days since I woke up from the nightmare of my grandpa’s hands in my apartment. My roommates, Stephanie and Tamara, have wiry bodies, and I have a hard time telling them apart without my glasses.

We’re all in our own beds in the room we share. The rain outside plops into puddles, and either Stephanie or Tamara says:

“Motherfucker skank ho. I’m gonna fuckin’ kill you. You ugly. You mean looking.”

All I can muster is “Well?” I lie back down.

That morning, Stephanie/Tamara has a screaming fit of psychosis (or is it a seizure? Both?) outside our room and the staff give her an injection to calm her down.

In the afternoon, the middle-aged women play cards with Laura, and the TV alternates between the Bucs’ game and the local radar. The smoke break is cut short due to the rain and winds picking up. The patients complain of soggy cigarettes.

Tropical Storm Erika dissipates over the state. It pours and lightnings and thunders. By the time my boyfriend comes to pick me up, the bulk of the storm has swiveled elsewhere. I never have ECT again. Only thick gray clouds remain.



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